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ABSTRACT

It is necessary for journalism educators to introduce students to the world of desktop computers. In one journalism class at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, the instructor introduces his students to the computer in the first few days of class. He first walks them through the disk-formatting process; shows them how to get into and out of WordPerfect; and tells them they may start using the computer in class. At this point, the instructor is able to turn the class toward the fundamentals of journalism, and the computer is cast in the role of a tool used for writing--just like a pen or pencil. Students are encouraged to compose on the computer and to take class notes on the computer. The computer is also a valuable tool in the process of teaching students to write on deadline. Sometimes mock news events are staged, and the students write their stories in class before leaving. By the end of the semester few miss their deadlines. In addition to its being a basic writing tool, personal computers have many other uses for print journalists. Students may learn to edit and lay out stories. Also, databases and the Internet can be searched for information with computers. Data from surveys or investigations can then be analyzed with personal computers and appropriate software. (TB)

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Benefits of Teaching Beginning Reporting Students in a Computer Classroom

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Paper presented at the Conference of Pennsylvania Journalism Educators

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Running head: BEGINNING REPORTING

Benefits of Teaching Beginning Reporting Students in a Computer Classroom

The world of the journalist is tuned in -- tuned into government, tuned into business, tuned into the lives of everyday people. And a tool used more and more in this tuning in process -- through such things as networks and bulletin boards -- is the computer. On a more basic level, personal computers are widely used in the production of newspapers. Indeed, a recent study I conducted of Pennsylvania weekly newspapers found nearly all of those responding to a mail questionnaire used computers in their operations (Wilson, 1994).

Further, Ward and Hansen (1993) have pointed out how we may link up electronically with products ranging from computers on our laps with modems to computer billboards. In addition, Solimeno (1992, June 29) has noted that movement to at least partial pagination has been increased by QuarkXPress and other desktop publishing software as even big newspapers have been generating advance pages with such programs. Indeed, newspaper designer Robert Lockwood says desktop publishing's impact has been sizable as it has freed publishers from assembly-line-like linear progressions (cited in Silverstone, 1992, April). To that, Silverstone (1992, April) has added that desktop publishing is seen as giving control back to individuals.

In addition, Corcoran (1994, June 27) has noted that computer users have been impressed by the raw speed of the Power Macintosh version of PageMaker 5.0. Indeed, Carlton (1994, March 14) has pointed out that the PowerPC runs software up to four times as fast as earlier Macintosh computers.

Therefore, with the press firmly seated at the platform of the computer, and with that platform racing faster and faster, it seems necessary for journalism educators to introduce students to the world of desktop computers. And, in my view, what better time to start than in the

beginning.

Meeting the Computer

The students generally are introduced to IBM personal computers running WordPerfect on the second day of class. The introduction is simple. I walk them through the disk formatting process, show them how to get into and out of WordPerfect and tell them they may start using the computer in class. I tell them to think of it as a typewriter with a TV screen. To further ease the concerns of those students who are not familiar with IBM computers or WordPerfect software, I assure them the commands are simple and walk the class through basic commands. I find this provides enough instruction in the computer for most students. Any other questions, which generally seek reinforcement of the instruction on basic commands, are dealt with as they arise during the semester.

At this point, I am able to turn the class toward the fundamentals of journalism, and the computer is cast in the role of a tool used for writing -- just like a pen or pencil.

This is my fourth year at Edinboro, and students in each Beginning Reporting class have learned to tackle their anxieties and best the computer to write stories during class from mock news conferences, press briefings, police reports and speeches. There always seem to be those students who are concerned initially with their typing skills and computer skills. But these students find that through repeated use of these skills they gain a greater proficiency in these areas.

Also, students often begin the course wanting to write their stories longhand first, then recreate them on the computer. I discourage this practice and encourage them to compose their stories on the computer. I point out that as a journalist of many years at a metropolitan daily, I could not recall

anyone writing stories in longhand first. We all created on the computer screen. I stress that this saves time -- time the students cannot waste if they want to beat the end-of-class deadline. Though my anecdotes are doubtless interesting, I think it's the last argument that has the greatest influence.

In addition to learning to use them as writing implements, there are other ways students gain from using computers in class.

I encourage students to turn on their computers in class and take notes during lecture on the computer in front of them. Many do. And by so doing they improve both note-taking and typing skills -- skills journalists need. Indeed, working journalists often take notes on computers in the office. It lets them take clean notes and piece together stories fairly quickly -- a big plus when deadlines loom. Further, more and more journalists are taking notes on laptop computers in the field. Therefore, I believe encouraging note-taking on computers in class is justifiable.

I have discovered another benefit of having computers in class as well. I find that students with some disabilities benefit from being able to take notes and compose stories on a computer in front of them. It has the ability to reduce the effect of some disabilities and by doing so opening doors of opportunity. Indeed, it is hard to miss the beaming faces, the heightened self-confidence, the pride felt as they find themselves able to create finished products.

Beating Deadlines

I have found that one of the biggest hurdles young student journalists have to jump over is the clock. Once accomplished, they tend to gain confidence in their abilities. For that reason, and because journalists have to live with deadline pressures, I stage mock news events and have the students write their stories then and there on computers -- just as they would at virtually any news

organization. Indeed, I can recall student comments about how being able to write on computers in class helps make it seem real.

Semester after semester, the first deadline is met with a fair amount of anxiety. Eyes widen. Faces flush. Perspiration flows. More than a few students mutter words of relief -- at least that's the only kind I hear -- when their stories clear the laser printer in the room.

Yet at the end of semester after semester, few students still struggle to beat deadlines. They have become more and more able to ask good questions, collect the answers and turn that information into news stories. They beat the clock. And they do it on today's typewriter -- the personal computer.

Overall, the students gain experience and show improvement in several areas. In addition to improving their typing skills, students become better able to write stories in the clear, crisp style of journalism. They gain confidence in their own abilities. They gain realistic training in facing deadlines and beating them with the tool of the trade -- the computer. And because much of this is done in class, students are able to receive advice, coaching and support from their professor.

It would seem the use of computers in journalism classrooms has much to offer from the very beginning.

Beyond the Basics

In addition to being a basic writing tool, personal computers have many other uses for print journalists. Information can be sought with them through databases and the vast Internet computer network. Data from surveys or investigations can be analyzed with personal computers and appropriate software. Publications can be designed and produced using desktop publishing

software and laser printers that are continually improving. Advertisements can be created on them, too. And there are other uses as well.

But how does this fit in the classroom?

More advanced reporting classes can show students how to tap CD-ROMs, databases and the Internet. The benefits seem obvious. Such technology can give journalists instant access to a wide range of relevant information. And if we teach students to use it on a regular basis the real winner will be readers who receive articles that provide greater depth on events and issues that affect their lives.

And there are many other ways to incorporate computers into journalism classrooms. Editing classes can put stories in computer files for students to call up, edit and save. This lets students edit copy in the way it is edited in newsrooms across the country -- on computer screens.

Classes can show student journalists how to design pages electronically with desktop publishing software. They also can show how to incorporate graphics and edit photographs digitally. In addition, a wide range of electronic publication processes can be taught.

It seems the ways we as educators can introduce journalism students to computers and computer technology is limited largely by our imaginations. As each year passes I see fewer and fewer students who are unfamiliar with personal computers. And as prices keep falling the computer may become the medium of choice.

Then, perhaps, we can teach students to create electronic newspapers -- ones without paper.

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